

# Millennial Teachers of Canada: Innovation within the Boxed-In Constraints of Tradition

Lena Shulyakovskaya

**Abstract**—Every year, schools aim to develop and adopt new technology and pedagogy as a way to equip today's students with the needed 21st Century skills. However, the field of primary and secondary education may not be as open to embracing change in reality. Despite the drive to reform and innovation, the field of education in Canada is still very much steeped in tradition and uses many of the practices that came into effect over 50 years ago. Among those are employment and retention practices. Millennials are the youngest generation of professionals entering the workplace at this time and the ones leaving their jobs within just a few years. Almost half of new teachers leave Canadian schools within their first five years on the job. This paper discusses one of the contributing factors that lead Canadian millennial teachers to either leave or stay in the profession - standardized education system. Using an exploratory case study approach, in-depth interviews with former and current millennial teachers were conducted to learn about their experiences within the K-12 system. Among the findings were the young teachers' concerns about the constant changes to teaching practices and technological implementations that claimed to advance teaching and learning, and yet in reality only disguised and reiterated the same traditional, outdated, and standardized practices that already existed. Furthermore, while many millennial teachers aspired to be innovative with their curriculum and teaching practices, they felt trapped and helpless in the hands of school leaders who were very reluctant to change. While many new program ideas and technological advancements are being made openly available to teachers on a regular basis, it is important to consider the education field as a whole and how it plays into the teachers' ability to realistically implement changes. By the year 2025, millennials will make up approximately 75% of the North American workforce. It is important to examine generational differences among teachers and understand how millennial teachers may be shaping the future of primary and secondary schools, either by staying or leaving the profession.

**Keywords**—21st century skills, millennials, teacher attrition, tradition.

## I. INTRODUCTION

EVERY year, school boards strive for innovation in Education. That innovation comes in the form of new changes, such as latest technology, new pedagogical techniques, new ways to track student achievement, new ways to track teaching quality - just to name a few. Ultimately, the goal of educational innovation is to advance student learning in a way that would effectively develop the necessary 21st century skills. Many boards aim to move away from outdated traditional "assembly line" teaching approaches to inquiry-based inclusive classrooms in order to make education accessible to all learners. However, as boards incorporate new

pedagogical techniques, new teaching quality tracking systems, and new gadgets and apps, they do not necessarily become more innovative in order to make 21st century learning accessible to all learners.

Generally, the rationale and value of various new implementations come from educational leaders using a top-down approach, with little emphasis placed on the effectiveness of those implementations as experienced by teachers in their everyday classroom realities. At times, the changes continue to sustain the same traditionally standardized systems that have been there from the beginning. In many other cases, when teachers try to realistically implement the required changes, they realize that those same educational leaders are unable, and at times unwilling, to support and sustain those very changes.

This qualitative case study explored lived experiences of thirteen teachers in Canada. The goal of the study was to explore the contributing factors that led Canadian millennial teachers to leave the teaching profession. The most commonly used definition of what it meant to be a millennial was used - millennials are those individuals born roughly between 1977 and 1995 [1]. Three groups of participants were interviewed: Canadian millennial current teachers (n=4), Canadian millennial former teachers (n=5), former teachers of older generations who moved to Canada as immigrants (n=4). The reason for including the third group of participants - immigrant teachers, was to examine whether some of the contributing factors to attrition were in fact generational and unique to Canadian millennials, or if perhaps there were contributing factors that crossed generations and cultures. Several themes emerged out of this study. However, for the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on the theme that was brought up by the majority of participants - that of standardized educational practices.

## II. WHY MILLENNIALS?

Every generation carries with it its own set of values and ideals, rooted in the collective experiences of its time. Being the youngest generation of professionals, few studies have been conducted as of yet about millennial teachers specifically. Other sectors have already begun to address generational differences and needs of their younger employees, while the education sector remained fairly constant since the 60's, in terms of its employment and retention practices [1], [2].

A substantial number of studies have been conducted on teacher attrition of multiple generations. Those studies have identified a number of factors that influenced teachers to leave the profession. Among the most prevailing contributing

Lena Shulyakovskaya is with the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary, 2500 University Dr. NW, Calgary, AB, Canada (e-mail: yelena.shulyakovskay@ucalgary.ca).

factors were personal teacher characteristics, such as age and experience [3].

In 2015, the youngest and least experienced teachers in Alberta schools were those of the millennial generation. They also made up approximately 45% of the teachers in the province [4]. At the moment, approximately 40% of Alberta teachers leave the profession within their first five years on the job [5]. There is an urgency to find appropriate ways to retain the millennial generation of teachers because in just over 10 years, millennial employees will comprise 75% of the North American workforce [6].

### III. FINDINGS

Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with each of the thirteen participants. Fig. 1 shows which concerns were brought up and how frequently. The most prevailing concern, especially that which was brought up by millennial former teachers, was that of standardized educational practices. That indicated that the field of education as a whole was still very traditional and standardized overall despite there being constant changes and "improvements" implemented every year.

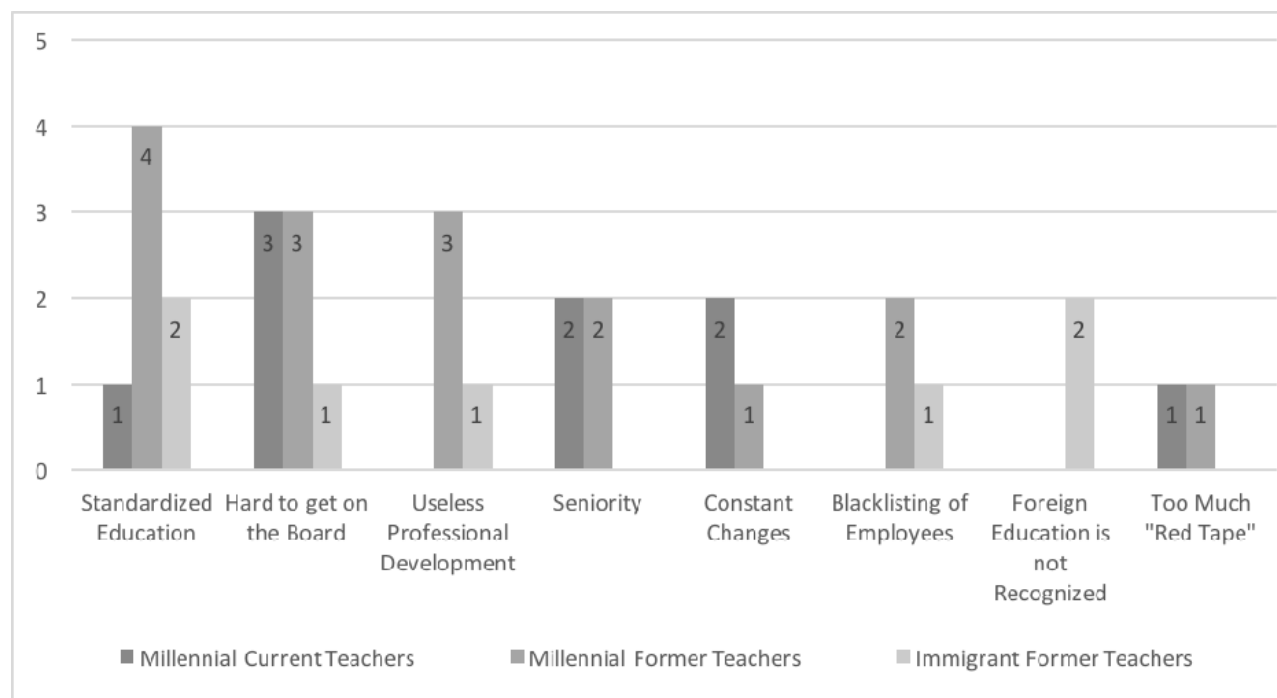


Fig. 1 Teachers' Concerns with the Education System

Teacher participants from the three groups expressed quite strong concerns with standardized practices. While some teachers left the profession because they felt they could not make education accessible to all learners, others remained in it in order to try affect change in the future. How teachers dealt with the standardized teaching environment came down to individual personalities of teachers - whether they left or stayed to improve it. However, what should not be overlooked is the fact that the majority of teacher participants felt the education system was still, in fact, very traditional and standardized.

Illustrative quotations taken from the participants' transcripts are used below to support and explain the finding on participants' concerns with the standardized education system. Direct quotations are also used to further validate the finding and its interpretation of standardized education as experienced by millennial teachers in Canada.

One of the millennial participants, Kiara, left the teaching profession because she felt every year, teachers were forced to

embrace new changes to address the growing needs and issues connected to the practice of teaching and learning. However, those changes never offered a valid constant solution. Instead, they only hindered teacher effectiveness because teachers were too focused on trying to learn the new programs or pedagogies, while simultaneously being less focused on the students:

*I felt like generationally... there's been a rapid shift in school between the 1960's and then we reached the year 2000 when we're dealing with technology, we're dealing with a completely different way of learning. And in that, it feels like everything is trial and error. So there seem to be consistent changes all the time, but no one can figure out what constant solution we need. And you end up feeling like every year, you're a guinea pig with children to deliver information or whatever it is that they need. And that doesn't necessarily seem to be fair to kids and it's not fair on the teachers. There is no consistency so you can do your job, you know. And if your job is to*

*educate, right, primarily, if that's the thing that you love, it's really the act of teaching and delivering curriculum and creating curriculum, but then that stops being number one on your priority list because in the meantime you're trying to function or figure out how to maneuver around all these other things that you need to do that are bound... that are subject to change in years to come because we can't figure out how to tap into 21<sup>st</sup> century learning in the way that we need to. You know, I think as we're trying to progress, we're not actually thinking of the practicality of the changes we're making... (Kiara)*

Kiara, together with an immigrant teacher from an older generation - Veronika, felt as though the system that was already in place could not be changed; and, therefore, teachers were not actually able to affect change on the systemic level in order to make education more accessible to different learners. *"You can't. I felt like I can't, I can't, there is nothing that's allowing me to do what I wanted to do"* (Kiara). Veronika suggested that one simply needed to learn to live within the existing system and only young naive people thought that they could change the world and beat the system: *"... because it is young people who have the energy, who think they can change the world. And with age, you realize that the world cannot be changed. And that's why you just have to peacefully coexist within the system in which you find yourself"* (Veronika). That belief of not being able to affect change because of the systemic practices already in place may not have been just that of the older generations since Kiara believed that as well. On the other hand, Courtney - a millennial current teacher, is not satisfied with the current standardized system and is hoping to one day be in the position where she will be able to affect some of the changes on the systemic level. One of the reasons she is doing her Master of Education degree at the moment is to help her move up to more leadership positions in the future.

All of the millennial former teachers, one millennial current teacher, and two immigrant former teachers expressed opinions indicative of not approving of standardized practices in teaching. Those opinions criticized the current systemic practices, such as coding special needs and gifted students, where the inability to achieve as well as an "average student" was believed to be the child's deficit. Other participants criticized standardised tests, claiming that those made teachers teach to the test rather than actually instilling knowledge and transferrable skills in their students. Some also believed the current curriculum was too "narrow" and needed to be opened up in order to successfully move into inquiry-based learning.

*It's like that myth about Procrustes' bed. In order to get into Rome, there was this bench, it had a specific size. Everyone who wanted to get into Rome, was put on that bench. If you're a dwarf, you got stretched out. If you're a giant, you had something cut off or squeezed in. And schools cannot do that.* (Veronika, immigrant former teacher)

*I think some big changes just need to happen within teaching through an outdated system. Just that "we teach, they listen" type model isn't preparing students for their future, for life, for careers, for 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

*thinkers, learners. So I think to have some new fresh perspective is important... I would argue that curriculum needs to be more open-ended and more emergent... There are still curriculum expectations but you can meet all those expectations through inquiry. And there are so many cross-curricular things you can get at by learning through students' questions and by learning in an emergent curriculum. So emergent meaning that what works for that class and what their interests are and what their strengths are that will decide the curriculum a bit more (...) we're always saying: "I have to cover the curriculum, I have to cover the curriculum!" Because it is, it's massive, I found. And it's great things they need to learn but I think there's different ways we can go about it.* (Courtney, millennial current teacher)

*I'd like to see the elimination of standardized tests. Sometimes, teachers plan lessons as a means to an end kind of thing because of these tests and I don't think that's any way to go about teaching – just so that their students can pass tests and so that their school can look good.* (Olga, millennial former teacher)

*I really feel it's important for teachers to have the space to be creative, to be flexible, and to not let assessments... dominate their teaching. I think that's really important because if you let that control how you teach your class, it'll affect, first of all, your relationship with the students, it'll affect whether they're engaged or not... So I think teachers need to have space to teach kids and to have kids contribute to critical thinking and to pragmatics. Otherwise, how are they going to thrive in the real world? ... So I think teachers should have more freedom to teach to your class where there are some people who are interested in this topic, some people who have more of these sorts of funds of knowledge, some people who want to share their culture. Like, every class should be different. Basically, it's not cookie-cutter. I don't think you can say: "I'm teaching grade eight for 10 years and every class I'm going to teach the same way." But because of assessments, because of standardized tests, you know...* (Zoey, millennial former teacher)

*... so this is the other part as to why I left teaching. I feel like we're very standardized in the way that we teach. Although we talk about differentiation, I think it's not something that people really understand how to do and I think typically because the deficit is placed on students versus the school system, and it's not fair. And I thought perhaps I'd have the opportunity to be able to make education accessible. But ultimately I don't think I was and I don't think I can because I think the mentality is still - the deficit is placed on students, which is why we have infinite amounts of coding, we have issues with behaviour, we have standardized tests – none of those things have changed. And so ultimately, we say: "Oh this kid is gifted, this kid has a learning disability." Realistically, it's sort of like: "Well, yeah, but the school... the deficiency isn't in those children." Learning cannot possibly be one way, it doesn't make sense,*

*understanding can't be one way. And I think we're not looking at things like, for instance, frontal lobe development or executive skills – things that should be integrated into the system. And so yeah, to me, I just felt as though I wanted to make learning accessible to everybody and make them feel as though school was worthwhile...* (Kiara, millennial former teacher)

Olga's and Zoey's concerns with standardized assessments could be seen in Jenny's experiences. She recalled teaching her students to the test the first couple of years of her teaching career:

*So I would focus a lot on like exam preparation. I would focus a lot on making sure they understood how to use the formulas. Less so on how did they come up to understand this formula. So I'd just be like: "This is the endpoint, you have to be able to perform." So near the end, I would have like almost like three weeks of Diploma prep. where I would just give them tons and tons of old diploma exams to work through. And like by the time they got there to the end like now I see that they could perform. But now I understand how testing works and I wasn't actually teaching them knowledge, I was just teaching them how to take this test (...) It was like a drill grill. Where I just grilled them and like drill, drill, drill kind of thing... But then I realized that as soon as the students walk out of the exam, they forget everything. So I spent all this time teaching for this one moment and then everything goes out the door.* (Jenny, millennial former teacher)

Because standardized education is an immense research area, a separate study is needed to explore connections between the curriculum, standardized education, and teacher attrition, particularly young teacher attrition.

When giving suggestions for policymakers, participants in this study asked for less bureaucracy and asked for a change in the way the current curriculum worked:

*So give teachers more freedom... And the next part I would say, it's hard though – less bureaucracy, red tape, paper work, all that stuff you're spending time doing but that's taking time away from preparing interesting lessons, from doing things outside of class.* (Zoey, millennial former teacher)

*Just to be more open. And, I know there's tons of legality but just to be open. What's so bad about having an outdoor education program? Why is it so hard to take kids camping? Like, I know all these teachers that want to do an outdoor ed. program or want to do service trips to overseas. Because there's so much red tape and so much paperwork, they don't go through it to making it easier for teachers to do that. It'd be so great if they could do it. These are the teachers that are so passionate, they could touch students, and they could get students really inspired and really involved in a program like that. But it's just so hard... Like, you know, if we want to take kids camping, we can only take them up until this point and there has to be this and this and this and this and this. And then you know, by the time you get to the fifth*

*step, well, what's the point?* (Sophia, millennial current teacher)

As it stands, teacher participants had varying concerns as to why they either left or stayed in the teaching profession. However, all of the millennial former teachers brought up the theme of standardized education system. The purpose of this paper was to illustrate the finding on standardized education, without going in-depth into any of the other themes that came up during the course of the study. Despite the plethora of changes that were aimed at teaching and learning improvement, teacher participants still found themselves in traditional and standardized settings. Those standardized settings made teachers feel helpless and unable to effectively affect 21st century learning. Although some resources and services appeared to be in place to assist teachers with what would be a more innovative approach to teaching, teachers could not fully utilise those resources without being met with "red tape" that prevented them from actually doing it.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Changes in the field of education often come using a top-down approach, with educational leaders being often unaware of the classroom realities in which the changes are to be implemented. Many leaders are also unaware of the sustainability and effectiveness of the proposed and incorporated changes. Despite the top-down push of changes and new ideas, teachers (bottom) find themselves in situations unable to realistically incorporate the new changes and ideas because the bigger system and educational leaders (top) are unable, and at times unwilling, to effectively accommodate the very changes they push onto the teachers. As new technology and pedagogy techniques are introduced to the teachers, it is important to recognize the practicality of those innovations and understand the bigger educational system in which those innovations would have to be incorporated.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] E. Behrstock, and M. Clifford, "Leading Gen Y teachers: Emerging strategies for school leaders," in *National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality*, 2009. Retrieved from <http://secc.sedl.org/orc/resources/February2009Brief.pdf>
- [2] A. F. Ball, "Learning to teach in a complex interconnected world," in *Theory Into Practice*, vol. 52, pp. 31-41, 2013.
- [3] E., Allensworth, S. Ponisciak, and C. Mazzeo, "The schools teachers leave: Teacher mobility in Chicago," in *Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago*, 2009. Retrieved from <http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/publications>
- [4] Alberta Education, "Alberta teaching certification statistics," 2015. Retrieved from <https://education.alberta.ca/teaching-in-alberta-what-you-need-to-know/certification-statistics/>. Accessed on January 16, 2016.
- [5] L. Schafer, J. S. Long, D. J. Cladinin, S. Wnuk, E. Pinnegar, S. McKenzie-Robblee, P. Steeves, and C. A. Downey, "Early Career Teacher Attrition: Problems, Possibilities, Potentials," 2012.
- [6] R. Boissonnault, and E. Csorba, "Gen Y employees want freedom and respect - and they want it now," in *Globe and Mail*, 2014.